

selections for high school students

READING

By Russell Kirk

In many American high schools, the teaching of literature is in decay.

One reason for this decay is the unsatisfactory quality of many programs of reading; another is the limited knowledge of humane letters possessed by some well-intentioned teachers, uncertain of what books they ought to select for their students to digest well.

In this brief essay, I propose to suggest, first, the sort of literature which ought to be taught; and then to list certain works of imaginative letters — poetry, novels, plays, philosophical studies, and other branches of letters not embraced by the natural sciences or by social studies — especially commendable for this purpose.

T.S. Eliot remarked that it is not so important what books we read as that we should read the same books. He meant that a principal purpose of studying literature is to give us all a common culture, ethical and intellectual, so that a people may share a general heritage and be united through the works of the mind.

There exist a great many good books, Eliot knew: of these many commendable books, we need to select for general study a certain elevated few for particular attention, that nearly everyone may share in our cultural patrimony. This is my purpose here — though I claim no sovereign authority, and stand ready to have other people substitute books of

equal merit for some or many of the titles I suggest.

What is wrong with the typical high-school anthology or program of literature nowadays?

I am of the considered opinion that the usual courses in literature, from the ninth grade through the 12th also, generally, in lower grades, suffer from two chief afflictions. The first of these is a misplaced eagerness for "relevance." The second of these is a kind of sullen purposelessness — a notion that literature, if it has any end at all, is meant either to stir up discontents, or else merely to amuse. Let me touch briefly here on both troubles.

Literature certainly ought to be relevant to something. But to what?

Too many anthologists and teachers fancy that humane letters ought to be relevant simply to questions of the hour — the latest political troubles, the fads and foibles of the era, the concerns of commercial television or of the daily newspaper. Such shallow relevance to the trivial and the ephemeral must leave young people prisoners of what Eliot called the provinciality of time: that is, such training in literature is useless to its recipients within a few years, and leaves them ignorant of the enduring truths of human nature and of society.

Principal content

Genuine relevance in literature, on the contrary, is related to what Eliot described as "the permanent things": to the splendor and tragedy of the human condition, to constant moral insights, to the spectacle of human history, to love of community and country, to the achievements of right reason.

Such a literary relevance confers upon the rising generation a sense of what it is to be fully human, and a knowledge of what great men and women of imagination have imparted to our civilization over the centuries.

Let us be relevant in our teaching of literature, by all means — but relevant to the genuine ends of the literary discipline, not relevant merely to what will be thoroughly irrelevant tomorrow.

As for the second affliction, purposelessness, the study of literature would not have been the principal content of



Russell Kirk is editor of *The University Bookman* and author of *Eliot and His Age*, *The Conservative Mind* and other literary works.

formal schooling for many centuries, had humane letters seemed to offer only a kind of safety-valve for personal discontents, or else merely a form of time-killing — the filling of idle hours.

In every civilized land, literary studies were taken very seriously indeed until recent decades. Literature and its related arts usually were called "rhetoric," in times past; and this word "rhetoric" means "the art of persuasion, beautiful and just." Literature, in short, was and is intended to persuade people of the truth of certain standards or norms.

Literature has been regarded as the peer of theology and philosophy because literature's real purpose is quite as serious as the purposes of theology and philosophy. But literature's proper method differs from the methods of theology and philosophy.

Unlike those disciplines, literature is supposed to wake us to truth through the imagination, rather than through the discursive reason. Humane letters rouse us to the beautiful and the just through symbol, parable, image, simile, allegory, fantasy, and lively example. The purpose of literature is to develop the moral imagination. If human beings do

not feel the touch of the moral imagination, they are as the beasts that perish.

Or, to put it another way, the aim of humane letters, of our courses in "literature" (hideous phrase) "communication skills," is to form the normative consciousness.

Now I do not mean that the great writer incessantly utters homilies. Wit Ben Johnson, he may scourge the follies of the time, but he does not often murmur, "Be good, fair maid, and let wh will be clever." Rather, the man of letters teaches the norms of our existence often rowing with muffled oars.

Like William Faulkner, the writer may write much more about what is evil than about what is good; and yet, exhibiting the depravity of human nature, he establishes in his reader's mind that awareness that there endure standard from which we may fall away; and the fallen nature is an ugly sight. Or the writer may deal chiefly, as did J.P. Marquand, with the triviality and emptiness of a smug society which has forgotten norms.

The better the artist, one almost may say, the more subtle the preacher. Imaginative persuasion, not blunt exhortation, commonly is the strategy of the literary champion of norms.

What I have written here ought to be commonplace. Yet these ideas seem to have been forgotten in many quarters. This normative endeavor ought to be the joint work of family and church and school. As the art of reading often is better taught by parents than it can be taught in a large schoolroom, so a knowledge of good books comes from the home at least as frequently as from the classroom.

Whether one's reading tastes are de-



Literature is opposed to wake us to truth through the imagination.

veloped in the school, the public library, or the family, there are certain patterns of reading by which a normative consciousness is developed. These patterns or levels persist throughout one's education (whether it is school-learning or self-instruction). We may call these patterns fantasy; narrative history and biography; imaginative creations in prose or verse; and philosophical writing (in which I include theology).

Young adults

With these levels or patterns in mind, I have arranged a sample program of reading for the concluding four years of secondary schooling. I list only works in the English language (or translations which have become part and parcel of English literature) both because my space is limited and because really "foreign" literature should be taught in classes in French, German, Spanish, and the like.

I repeat that I do not insist upon the particular books suggested below, although I think them excellent ones; all I trying to do here is to suggest the real tone and quality of a good program in humane letters. I have included some old school favorites because their merit and importance have not diminished; on the other hand, I have excluded some old chestnuts (like George Eliot's *Silas Marner*) because they were never first-rate.

Because style and wisdom did not expire with the 19th century, among my selections are a number of our better recent authors. Students between the ages of 13 and 18 ought to be treated as young adults, actually or potentially capable of serious thought; therefore this is not a list of "children's books". But neither is it an exercise in pop culture and contemporaneity.

These are books calculated to wake the imagination and challenge the reason. None ought to be too difficult for young people to comprehend well enough — provided that they are functionally literate.

Recommended reading

Ninth-grade Level

For this year I emphasize *fantasy*, in the larger sense of that abused word.

If young people are to begin to understand themselves, and to understand other people, and to know the laws which govern our nature, they ought to be encouraged to read allegory, fable, myth, and parable. All things begin and end in mystery. Out of tales of wonder comes awe — and the beginnings of philosophy. The images of fantasy move us life-long. Sir Osbert Sitwell, when asked what lines of poetry had most moved him in all his life, replied candidly, "Froggie would a-wooing go, whether his mother would let him or no." So here are my fantastic recommendations —

— John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. (This is the most influential allegory in the English language.)

— William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

— Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House*



of Seven Gables or (perhaps preferably) *The Marble Faun*.

— Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kid-*

napped or one of his volumes of short stories.

— Ray Bradbury, *Something Wicked This Way Comes* or *Dandelion Wine*. (Bradbury is something far better than an accomplished "science fiction writer"; he is a man of remarkable ethical insights and great power of style.)

— Walter Scott, *Old Morality* or *The Heart of Midlothian*. (These are much more important romances than is *Ivanhoe*, so commonly taught.)

— Select poems of Spenser, Burns, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Shelley, Tennyson, Whittier, Longfellow, Chesterton, Kipling, Masfield, Yeats, Frost, and others — selected with an eye to the marvellous and the mysterious.

(It will be noted that for this grade, as for later ones, all recommended books are available in inexpensive paperback editions; it is unnecessary, except with incompetent teachers, to employ a fat and rather repellent anthology; besides, most high-school anthologies nowadays are shoddy.)

Tenth-grade Level



Here our vehicle for rousing the moral imagination is narrative history and

biography (including autobiography). Reading of great lives does something to form decent lives. I draw upon both "actual" and "imaginary" sources for this branch of literature.

— Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe*.
— William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra* or *Henry V*.

— Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail* or *The Conspiracy of Pontiac*.

— Mark Twain, *Huckleberry Finn* or *Life on the Mississippi*.

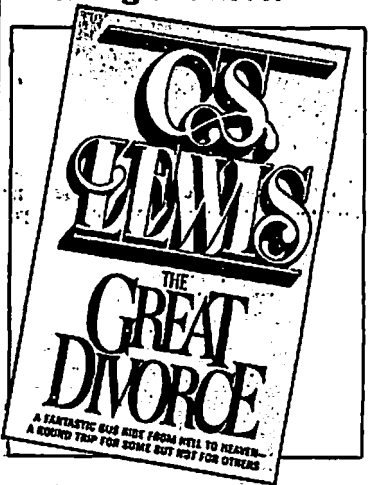
— Plutarch, select *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans* (probably in the Dryden-Clough translation).

— William Makepeace Thackeray, *Henry Esmond*.

— Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*.

(These choices, like those for ninth-grade students, range widely in time and approach; but all are very readable. They offer something to every educable student.)

Twelfth-grade Level



This is the year for developing a philosophic habit of mind through close attention to human letters. "Scientific" truth, or what is popularly taken for scientific truth, alters from year to year — with accelerating speed in our time. But poetic and moral truths change little with the elapse of centuries; and the norms of politics are fairly constant.

— Select *Epistles of St. Paul* taught as literature. (I assure you that this is quite constitutional, even in public schools.)

— William Shakespeare, *King Lear* or *Coriolanus*.

— Samuel Johnson, *Rasselas*.

— Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* (preferably in Long's translation).

— C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* or *The Great Divorce*.

— Christopher Marlowe, *Dr. Faustus*.

— Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* or *Nostramo*.

(It might be useful to add to these a little book of reflections or essays — George Gissing's *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, say, or Alexander Smith's *Dreamthorp*, or selections from Hawthorne's letters, or Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*.)

Eleventh-grade Level

Here, as "imaginative creations," I recommend for the third year of high school certain books which require serious interpretation and discussion.

— John Milton, *Paradise Lost*.

— Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (only two or three voyages thereof). Need it be remarked that Gulliver was not intended for the amusement of children?)

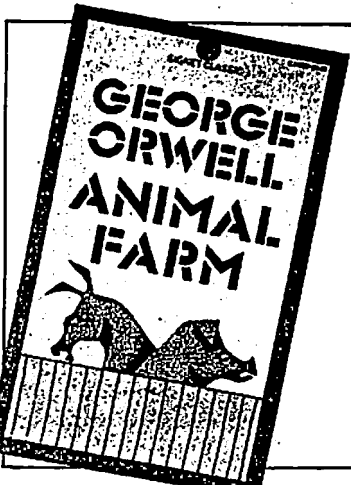
— Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* or selected short stories.

— Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* or *Bleak House*.

— T.S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (No drama is more relevant to the conflict of loyalties in the twentieth century.)

— George Orwell, *Animal Farm*.

— Select poems of a philosophical cast — George Herbert, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell, Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Alexander Pope, and others chiefly of the 17th and 18th centuries.



(Fiction is truer than fact: I mean that in great fiction we obtain the distilled judgments of writers of remarkable perceptions — views of human nature and society which we could get, if unaided by books, only at the end of life, if then.)